



# Making Wilkinsburg Sustainable

Vacant Lot Strategies and Recommendations

# Making Wilkinsburg Sustainable

Spring 2009 Sustainable Community Development Project

Produced by  
Carnegie Mellon University  
H. John Heinz III College  
School of Public Policy and Management

## *Project team:*

Leigh Halverson  
[lhavlers@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:lhavlers@andrew.cmu.edu)  
Nolan Leavitt  
[nleavitt@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:nleavitt@andrew.cmu.edu)  
Mike Spotts  
[mspotts@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:mspotts@andrew.cmu.edu)  
Josh Swiss  
[jswiss@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:jswiss@andrew.cmu.edu)

## *Wilkinsburg Borough Manager:*

Marla Marchinko  
Wilkinsburg Borough Building  
605 Ross Avenue  
Wilkinsburg PA 15221  
[mmarcinko@wilkinsburgpa.gov](mailto:mmarcinko@wilkinsburgpa.gov)



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# Sustainability needs in Wilkinsburg

## Wilkinsburg faces many challenges to sustainability

This report was commissioned in Spring 2009 with the goal of identifying strategies for improving the sustainability of the Borough of Wilkinsburg. This requires analyzing both current conditions and future actions from the perspectives of economics, equity, and the environment.



Over the course of this project our group met with numerous community leaders. Through these conversations and further data research several challenges to sustainability in Wilkinsburg arose:

1. Vacant properties and blight is widespread in the borough
2. Public housing units perpetuate a transitional community
3. Perception of crime prevents new residents and investment
4. Poverty and inequality divide the community
5. Obesity and diabetes disproportionately effect residents in Wilkinsburg
6. Neighborhood self esteem is low
7. Central business district is in need of revitalization
8. School district is underperforming
9. Property taxes are disproportionately high and prevent new development
10. Code enforcement of trash, dumping, broken windows and tax evasion is weak

In analyzing this list of challenges, our group recognizes **vacant property management as a primary priority for the borough**. Many of the other challenges stem from the consequences of widespread vacancy and blight. We believe that a strong solution to vacant properties will serve as a leverage point to redevelopment and improved quality of life in Wilkinsburg.

The remaining sections of this report will address the national issues surrounding vacant properties, identify the specific challenges to the Wilkinsburg community, outline the appropriate methods for analyzing and creating site specific recommendations for borough owned vacant properties and provide a series of specific recommendations in terms of sustainability.



# Vacant lots in the United States

## National Trends in Vacant Property Management

Before addressing the specific challenges faced by the Borough of Wilkinsburg, it is important to consider the issues and trends being faced nationwide. Municipalities throughout the country are dealing with the challenges that result from wide spread residential and commercial vacancies throughout urban areas. These properties contribute to and exacerbate a process of municipal decline and decay, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The cycle is often initiated by exogenous or societal forces, including suburban migration, industrial downsizing, and predatory lending practices. In many ways, the rise of vacancy in central cities and urbanized areas was accelerated by a number of federal policies that contributed to the overall decline of urban centers and the resulting population loss. The post-World War II migration of wealthy and middle-class individuals from central cities into increasingly diffuse suburban rings has had a devastating effect on the urban core while greatly reducing the amount of natural, open space not part of the built environment.

Abandonment drives property values down, increases the likelihood of unsafe conditions, creates urban blight, and leads to other social ills such as crime and fire. These factors reduce the incentive for both private and public investment and lead to the erosion of the municipal tax base. As a municipality's capacity to remediate the problems is reduced, reductions in local quality of life lead to further population loss, perpetuating the cycle of urban decline. Interruption of this cycle is often beyond the scope of municipal governments; it requires the carefully planned, coordinated efforts of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders. The first step of this process is to provide a careful accounting of the scope of the problem.

Vacant lots are easily recognizable; they are often characterized by a dilapidated structure, broken up or boarded windows, an overgrown lawn, and/or trash strewn across the property. There is a significant amount of data available that tries to quantify the scope of the problem. However, the accuracy of this data at times may be called into question. Many cities lack the capacity to keep an accurate accounting of the vacant properties in their jurisdiction; often these figures are based on tax delinquency data that is no longer up to date. Additionally, "residential housing units are counted differently than vacant land, retail, or industrial properties; definitions of "vacant" vary across communities; many cities have no central agency tracking vacant properties at all."

In the summer of 2008, the US Census Bureau estimated that 2.2 million homes across the country were vacant and listed for sale. This figure represents 2.8% of all homes in the US (rental properties excluded).

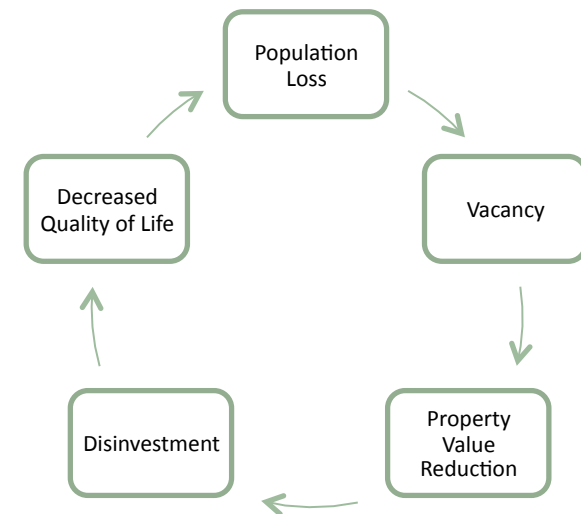


Figure 1: Urban Decline Cycle

## **Impacts**

Communities experience significant adverse effects from property abandonment and long-term vacancy. These effects include:



- Decreased Property Values,
- Lower tax revenues,
- Higher incidences of property liens,
- Fewer and lower quality public services, and
- Increased criminal activity
- Environmental and public health consequences

These consequences have an adverse effect on local economies and already-strained municipal budgets. According to a National Vacant Properties Campaign report funded by the US Environmental Protection Agency:

It is important to note that the impacts of property vacancy are felt beyond the neighborhoods in which they are located and the municipal governments that must respond to the problem. According to Place Economics, a DC-based consulting firm, one building, vacant for one year in a small-town commercial district, could lead to:

- \$ 250,000 in lost sales
- \$ 12,500 in lost sales tax revenue to state and local government
- \$ 15,000 in lost rent to the property owner
- \$ 1,500 in lost property tax revenue to local government
- \$ 51,000 in lost loan demand to local banks for the building
- \$ 15,000 in lost loan demand to local banks for the business
- \$ 750 in lost property management fees
- \$ 24,750 in lost business profits and owner compensation
- \$ 16,250 in lost employee payroll

## **The True Costs of Vacant Lots**

Vacant properties are an expense that local governments simply cannot afford – and that the expense grows with every year a property remains vacant or abandoned. Such properties produce no or little property tax income, but they require plenty of time, attention, and money:

- A study in Austin, Texas found that “blocks with unsecured [vacant] buildings had 3.2 times as many drug calls to police, 1.8 times as many theft calls, and twice the number of violent calls” as blocks without vacant buildings.
- More than 12,000 fires break out in vacant structures each year in the US, resulting in \$73 million in property damage annually. Most are the result of arson.
- Over the past five years, St. Louis has spent \$15.5 million, or nearly \$100 per household, to demolish vacant buildings. Detroit spends \$800,000 per year and Philadelphia spends \$1,846,745 per year cleaning vacant lots.
- A 2001 study in Philadelphia found that houses within 150 feet of a vacant or abandoned property experienced a net loss of \$7,627 in value.”

National Vacant Properties Campaign, 2005



# The multiplier effect

The multiplier effects of these losses extend beyond the neighborhood to the city, the region, and the rest of the country. Despite the fact that the effects of property vacancy are felt on the aggregate level, it is crucially important to remember that these impacts are most severely felt at the local community level. Individual residents may suffer from higher property insurance premiums, social fragmentation, and a poorer quality of life as crime, blight, and trash increase. Additionally, property owners within a close proximity of a vacant lot are likely to experience a decline in their property values (see Figure 2).

Central cities have been facing significant challenges from property vacancy for some time now; however, the problem has been greatly exacerbated by the current economic downturn and the significant rise in foreclosures nationwide.

It is estimated that one of every nine housing units in the US is now vacant; this amounts to approximately 14 million homes. Three percent of owned homes are vacant; according to University of Southern California Demographer Dowell Myers; a 1% benchmark is representative of normal conditions.

In the current economic climate, there has been a rise in vacancy among newer, more expensive homes. This partially reflects changing perceptions of the goals of homeownership. Given the currently prevalent view of homeownership as a wealth-building exercise, from an individual perspective "the most common reason a property is abandoned is that the cost of maintenance and operation exceeds the apparent value of the property. This occurs regardless of 'whether the market is intrinsically capable of supporting continued use of the property, or whether market inefficiencies, or inadequate and inaccurate information, lead property owners to that conclusion.'" (National Vacant Properties Campaign, 2005)

Therefore, a critical part of avoiding property abandonment in communities is creating an atmosphere which preserves property values and homeowner investment.

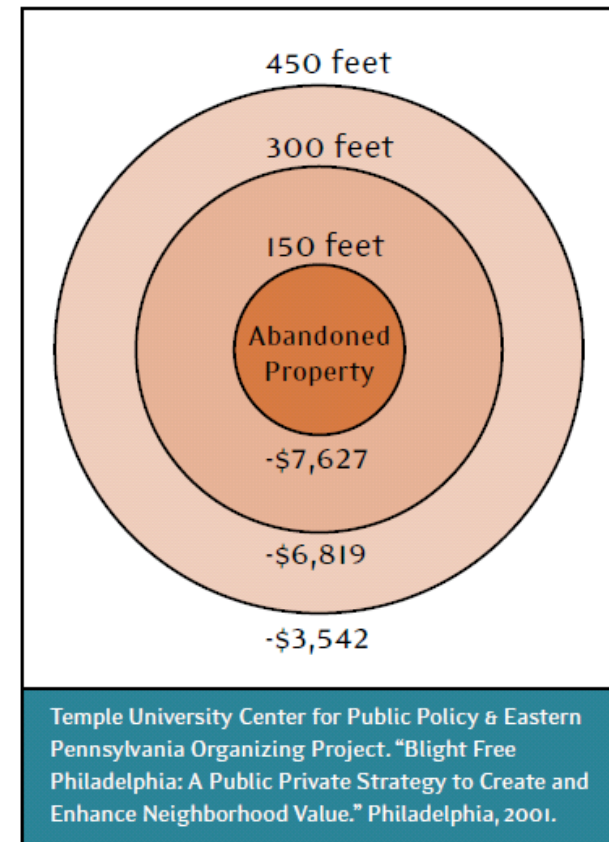


Figure 2: Property value decrease within a given radius, Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project & the Temple University Center for Public Policy, 2001





# Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania

## Wilkinsburg's Vacant Property Problem

The Borough of Wilkinsburg, PA is located on the eastern border of the City of Pittsburgh.

Wilkinsburg's peak corresponded closely with that of the Pittsburgh metropolitan region. During that era, the borough was vibrant, with a population peaking at approximately 37,000 between the 1950 and 1960 US Census. This made Wilkinsburg, with an area of 2.2 square miles, the most densely populated borough in the country.

Unfortunately, Wilkinsburg began to suffer along with the entire region with the decline of the steel industry. This decline was exacerbated by the fact that a sizable portion of Wilkinsburg's population has been transitional. As the community's reputation began to suffer, fewer people moved to the community to re-establish the declining population base. As of the 2000 US Census, Wilkinsburg's population had declined to 19,196.

Wilkinsburg's struggles extend beyond population loss. The borough exhibits numerous indicators of economic decline as of the 2000 US Census. Unfortunately, given the recent economic downturn and the length of time since the data was collected, it is impossible to accurately gauge the accuracy of these indicators. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Wilkinsburg tends to be in a more distressed position than the population at large.



Figure 3: Borough of Wilkinsburg, PA Map, Borough of Wilkinsburg, PA , 2009.

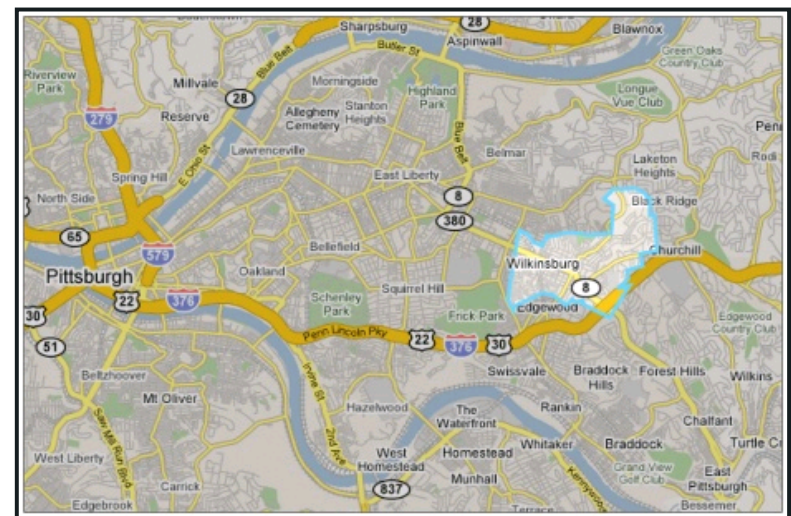


Figure 4: Borough of Wilkinsburg, PA Map, Borough of Wilkinsburg, PA , 2009.

Economic hardships in Wilkinsburg are not equitably distributed. The population of Wilkinsburg is 66.5% black, compared to 12.3% nationwide, 29.5% of which was below the poverty level as of the 2000 US Census. Furthermore, as stated in Figure 5, renters exhibit a significantly higher incidence of housing cost burden than homeowners. Housing cost burden is defined as monthly housing costs greater than 30% of the household's monthly income. It is to be expected, given the culture of homeownership in the United States, that those that rent tend to be more economically distressed. However, 58.4% of Wilkinsburg's housing stock consists of rental units (compared to 33.8% nationwide), meaning that a greater proportion of the borough's population is struggling to make home payments than the country at large.

These economic struggles are reflected in the borough's traditional business corridor, Penn Avenue. Economic struggles and population loss have led to disinvestment, and vacant commercial properties indicate that the business district is not operating at full capacity. Vacant commercial and residential property led to a significant erosion of the municipality's tax base; Wilkinsburg is currently creating and implementing an Early Intervention Plan to avoid Pennsylvania Act 47 fiscal distress status as part of its comprehensive planning process.

Investment in the borough is further hampered by the perception of high property taxes; Wilkinsburg has the highest property tax rate in Allegheny County. Despite this, actual tax expenditures paid by property owners are not above average as a result of lower relative property values. Therefore, Wilkinsburg must combat negative perception issues without the luxury of lowering taxes as a result of the municipality's fiscal condition. (US Census Bureau, 2000)

For renters, costs include rent and utility payments. For homeowners, costs include payments of principle, interest, taxes, and insurance (PITI). The statistics featured in Figure 5 are likely marginally inflated. Housing cost burden is indicated by costs *above* 30%, whereas the US Census data delineates payments of 30% and above.

|   | Wilkinsburg, PA | USA       | Percent Difference |
|---|-----------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Median Income   | \$26,621        | \$41,994  | (36.6%)            |
| Families Below Poverty Level  | 717             | -         | -                  |
| Families Below Poverty Level (Percentage)                           | 15.9%           | 9.2%      | 6.7%               |
| Individuals Below Poverty Level                                     | 3,531           | -         | -                  |
| Individuals Below Poverty Level                                     | 18.7%           | 12.4%     | 6.3%               |
| Population 65+ Below Poverty Level                                  | 14.2%           | 9.9%      | 4.3%               |
| Female Head of Household with Children under 18                     | 12.3%           | 7.4%      | 4.9%               |
| Female Head of Household with Children under 18 Below Poverty Level | 42.2%           | -         | -                  |
| Unemployed- Civilian Labor Force                                    | 773             | 9,902,108 | -                  |
| Unemployment Rate- Civilian Labor Force                             | 8.4             | 6.6%      | 1.8%               |
| Percent of Population in Labor Force                                | 61.3%           | 63.9%     | 2.6%               |
| Percent Receiving Public Assistance                                 | 5.5%            | -         | -                  |
| Homeowners with Housing Cost Burden                                 | 26%             | -         | -                  |
| Renters with Housing Cost Burden                                    | 40.2%           | -         | -                  |
| Median Property Value   | \$53,600        | \$119,600 | (55.2%)            |

Figure 5: Poverty Statistic Comparison, US Census Bureau, 2000.

In order to break the cycle of disinvestment and decline in Wilkinsburg, a comprehensive strategy for dealing with vacant properties must be established. Unmaintained vacant property often leads to further disinvestment, property devaluation, increases in crime and fires, and the increase of housing under the control of “slumlords” as homes are sold in sheriff’s sale at steep discounts. The Borough of Wilkinsburg currently owns 658 abandoned structures. According to the 2000 US Census, 1,558 of the borough’s 10,696 housing units (14.6%) were vacant; to compare, the nationwide home vacancy rate is 9.0% (the latter of which increased to 11.6% by 2007 estimates). Wilkinsburg will be facing significant challenges in confronting with this issue, even if the number of vacant units in the borough has stagnated (an unlikely occurrence given the current economic conditions).

One of the first steps in combating vacant lots in Wilkinsburg is to accurately quantify the scope of the problem. This necessitates a full and complete accounting of vacant or at risk properties in the Borough. There are currently a number of sources for this type of information available, including the Borough’s complete property list, an Abandoned Structure Inventory (ASI), and a list of Borough-Owned Parcels (BOP).

In analyzing these lists, it is important to note that there is some overlap and/or inconsistent data. Therefore, in the future it will be imperative that the lists be fully synthesized and updated into a complete inventory of at risk properties. That being said, the existing information can be extremely helpful in creating a general baseline assessment of where Wilkinsburg currently stands on this issue. For this report, the three lists were combined into a master list of properties for the Borough of Wilkinsburg. From that starting point, several categories of “focus properties” were identified; i.e. those that may be relevant to vacant property revitalization strategies.

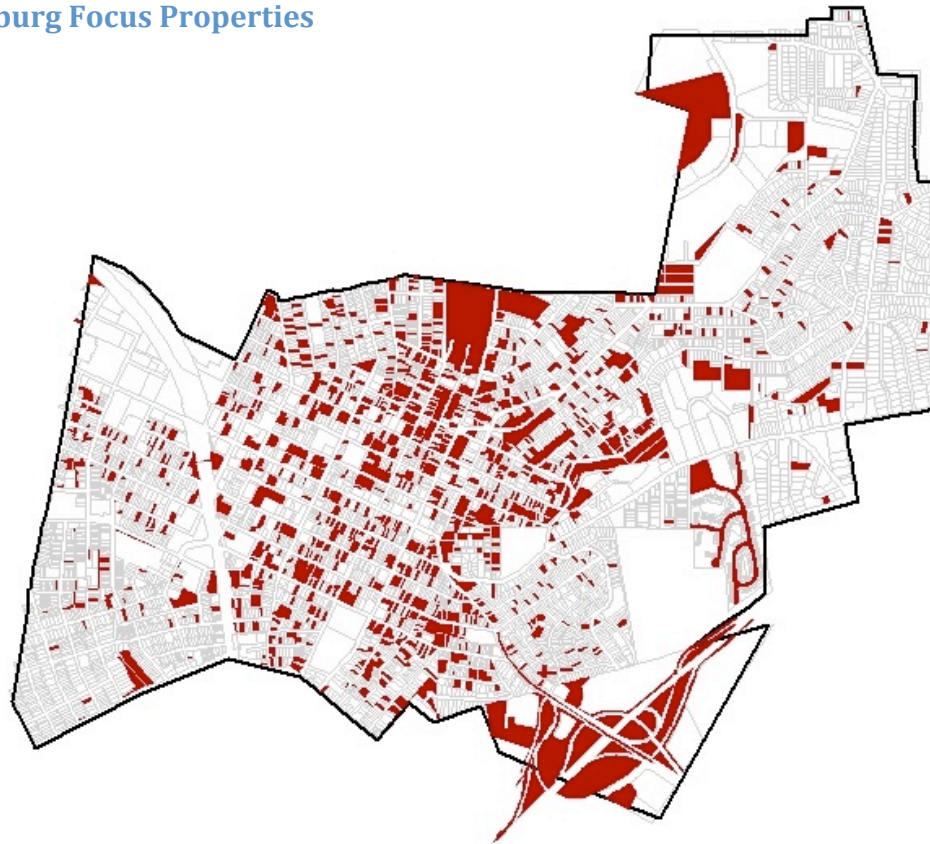
These categories included:

- Properties on the ASI List
- Properties on the BOP List
- Properties from the complete property list categorized as:
  - ✓ Condemned/Boarded Up
  - ✓ Fire Damaged
  - ✓ Vacant Commercial Land
  - ✓ Vacant Industrial Land
  - ✓ Vacant Land




This list was then inputted into Geographic Information System mapping software. Figure 6 shows the distribution of aggregated property throughout the Borough. While each sector of the Borough exhibits some level of vacancy, vacant properties are concentrated toward the central part of Wilkinsburg. In all, 1,586 of the Borough's 7,485 properties meet fall under one of the above categories (21%).

**Figure 6: Wilkinsburg Focus Properties**



Sources:  
Allegheny County  
Borough of Wilkinsburg  
Abandoned Structure Inventory;  
Glenn Engineering and Associates, Ltd.

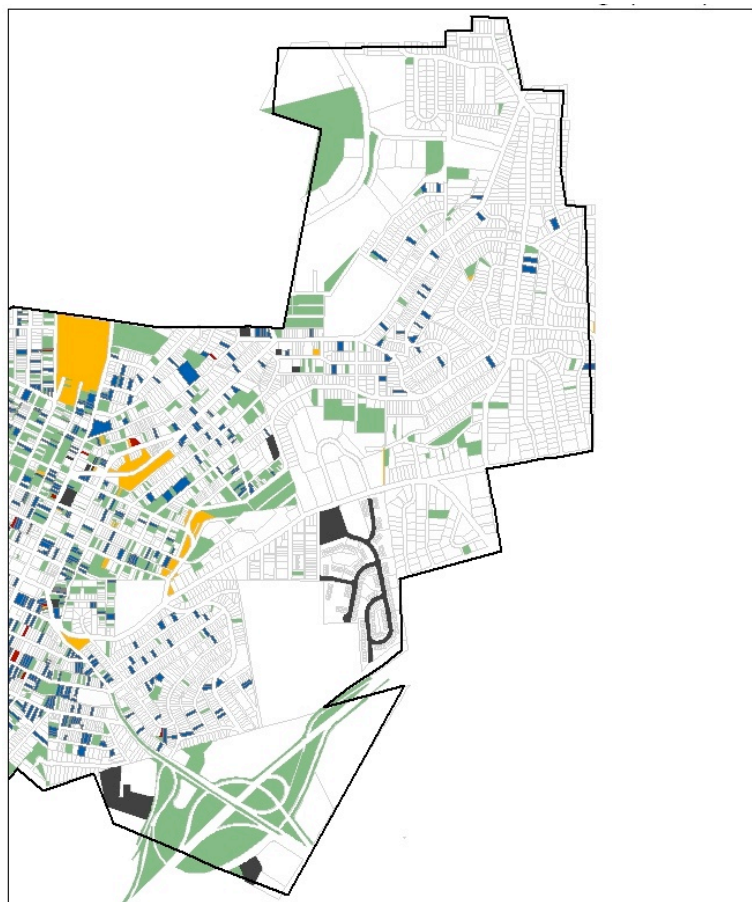
 Abandoned, Borough-Owned, Distressed, and/or Vacant

Map Created by Michael Spotts  
4/25/2009



Figures 7 and 8 show a more detailed breakdown of the focus properties by type. The most prevalent categories were Abandoned Structure Inventory properties (661 listings; Figure 9) and vacant land (762 listings, Figure 10).

**Figure 7: Properties by Type: Wilkesburg (East)**

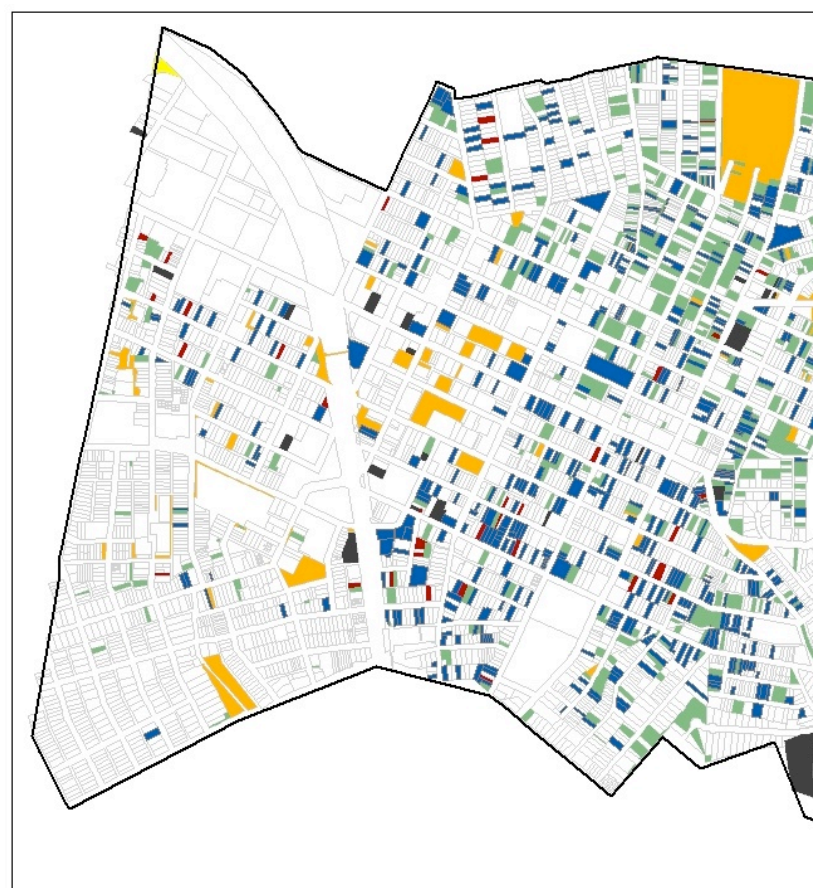


**CATEGORY**

- CONDEMNED/BOARDED-UP
- FIRE DAMAGED PROPERTY
- VACANT- ABANDONED STRUCTURE INVENTORY
- VACANT- BOROUGH OWNED PROPERTY LIST
- VACANT COMMERCIAL LAND
- VACANT INDUSTRIAL LAND
- VACANT LAND

**SOURCES:**  
 Allegheny County  
 Borough of Wilkesburg  
 Abandoned Structure Inventory;  
 Glenn Engineering and Associates, Ltd.  
 Map Created by Michael Spotts  
 4/25/2009

**Figure 8: Properties by Type: Wilkesburg (West)**

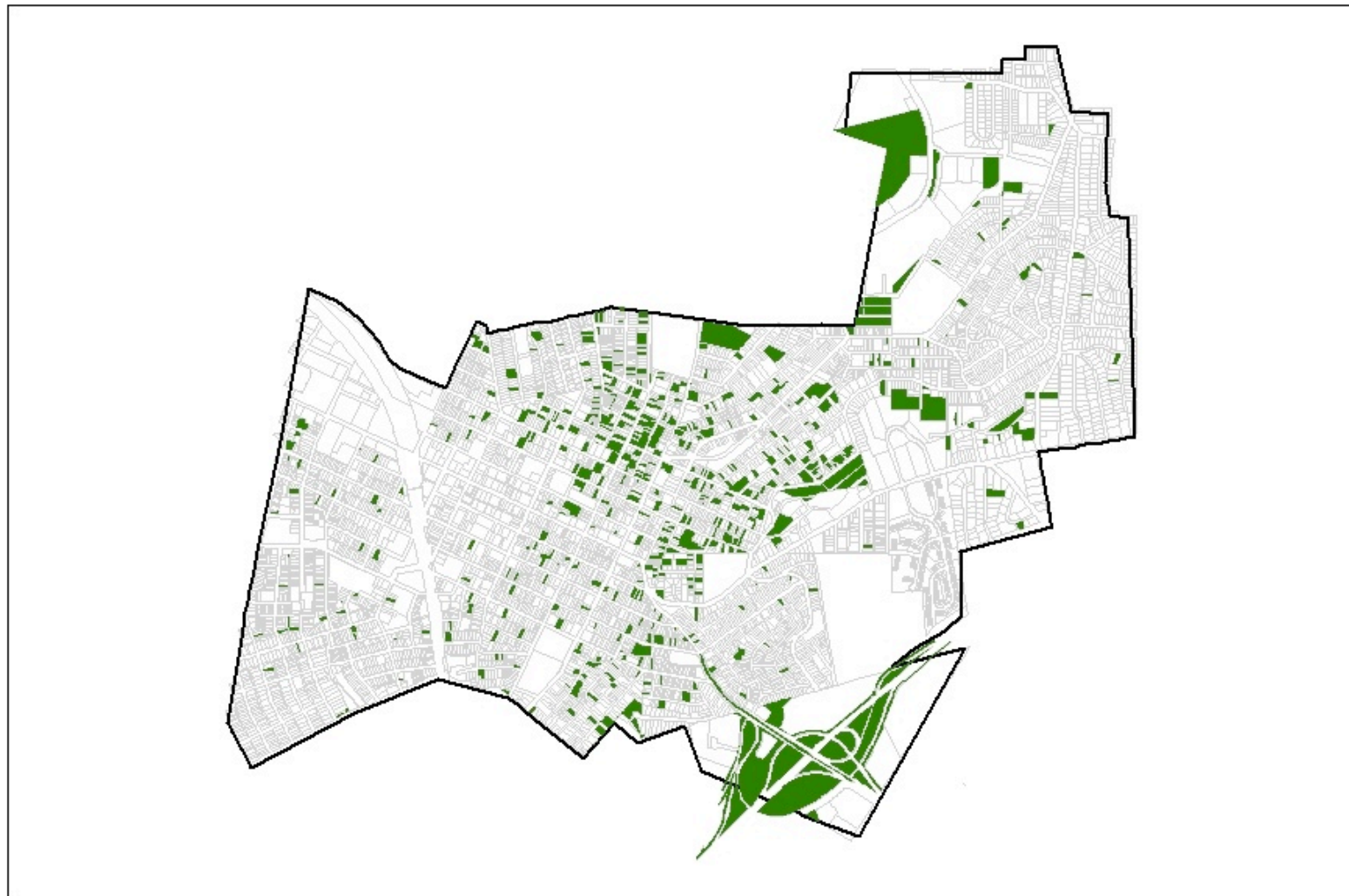


**CATEGORY**

- CONDEMNED/BOARDED-UP
- FIRE DAMAGED PROPERTY
- VACANT- ABANDONED STRUCTURE INVENTORY
- VACANT- BOROUGH OWNED PROPERTY LIST
- VACANT COMMERCIAL LAND
- VACANT INDUSTRIAL LAND
- VACANT LAND

**SOURCES:**  
 Allegheny County  
 Borough of Wilkesburg  
 Abandoned Structure Inventory;  
 Glenn Engineering and Associates, Ltd.  
 Map Created by Michael Spotts  
 4/25/2009

**Figure 9: Wilkinsburg Vacant Land**

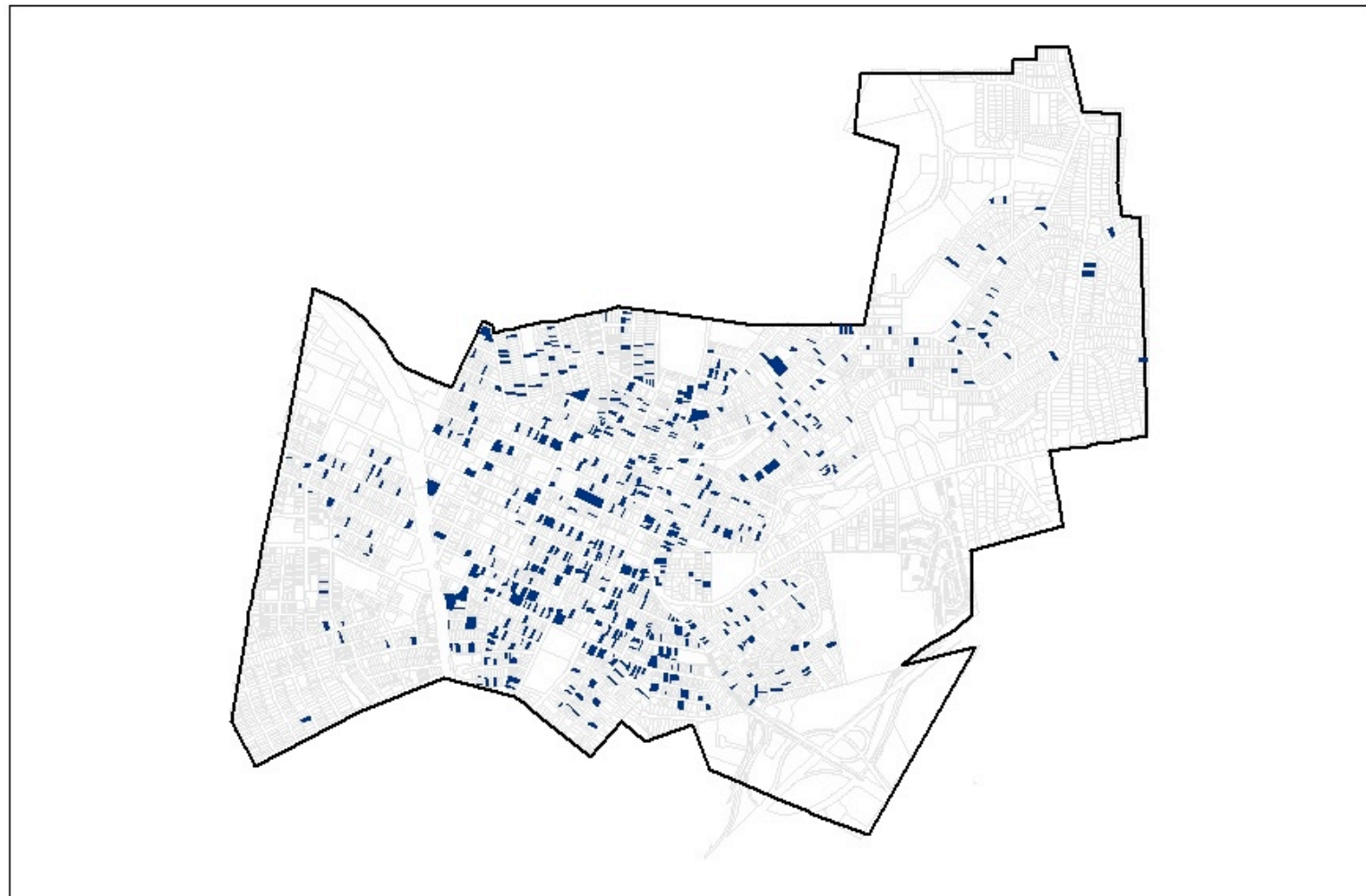


Sources:  
Allegheny County  
Borough of Wilkinsburg

 VACANT LAND

Map Created by Michael Spotts  
4/25/2009

**Figure 10: Wilkinsburg Abandoned Structure Inventory**



Sources:  
Allegheny County  
Abandoned Structure Inventory;  
Glenn Engineering and Associates, Ltd.

 ASI Identified Properties

Map Created by Michael Spotts  
4/25/2009



Vacant properties often fall into disrepair once there is no longer a responsible homeowner. This problem is exacerbated by the age of Wilkinsburg's housing stock: 84.9% of the borough's structures were built before 1970, 39.5% of total structures were built prior to 1940. Older properties tend to require higher levels of maintenance, and left unattended will likely deteriorate quicker. This would subsequently accelerate the decline of individual neighborhoods and their corresponding property values. As previously stated in Figure 2 on page 5, properties within a distance of 150 feet from a vacant property can experience a loss in value of over \$7,500; properties with 300 feet experience declines of nearly \$7,000; and properties within 450 feet can experience losses of over \$3,500.

While these figures may overstate the level of reduction given the relatively low overall property values within the Borough, they do underscore the fact that there is a non-trivial level of property value decline in neighboring properties. As Figure 11 shows, the vast majority of Wilkinsburg falls within 450 feet of a focus property. The total area affected by Wilkinsburg focus properties is 2.6 square miles (including affected areas outside the Borough's borders). This is an area larger than that of the entire Borough. Of this, 1.7 square miles of property fall within 150 feet of a focus property.

**Figure 11: Wilkinsburg Property Value Loss Risk Areas**



Sources:  
Allegheny County  
Borough of Wilkinsburg  
Abandoned Structure Inventory;  
Glenn Engineering and Associates, Ltd.

Map Created by Michael Spotts  
4/25/2009





# Making Wilkinsburg More Sustainable; Connecting Needs to Actions

In order to address the numerous challenges facing Wilkinsburg, the borough has begun to connect various resources and activities with its most glaring needs. The Borough's municipal finance problems have been previously addressed by a Heinz College report (Christy, et al., 2007), and are the subject of significant planning as part of Wilkinsburg's comprehensive planning process. Therefore, this element will not be discussed in depth by this report.

Another primary need to be addressed is disinvestment. Bringing in new homeowners and entrepreneurs is vital to the health of the community. While the availability of property at low cost can be asset in attracting the investment to Wilkinsburg, this cannot occur without a coordinated and targeted plan for the disposition of property and the stabilization of at risk neighborhoods. In the past, municipal actions regarding vacant properties (acquisition, demolition, sale, etc.) were done on an ad hoc basis without a clear set of criteria dictating appropriate actions.

Ideally, a plan for vacant properties would be in accordance with the municipality's Comprehensive Plan. The Borough's Comprehensive Plan was last updated in 1998, and the municipality is currently in the process of updating the plan. The plan is expected to be completed in the fall of 2009. As part of the plan, Wilkinsburg is creating a Master Site Plan for Business District Revitalization and an Early Intervention Program for municipal finances (Pre-Act 47 5-year plan). Additionally, the Borough will be working with local nonprofit Sustainable Pittsburgh to add a sustainability component to its municipal operations.

Wilkinsburg is also working to encourage investment in the community while directly combating perceptions of high taxation levels. The Borough has already enacted the *Tax Base Expansion Ordinance*. This act provides commercial owners a ten year tax abatement on the incremental increase in real estate taxes that occur because of the owner's investment. This plan has been implemented by the Borough and Wilkinsburg Borough School District; it has not been agreed to by Allegheny County, the third entity with taxing jurisdiction. The Borough is also considering implementing a similar tax abatement plan for residential investment.



Wilkesburg is also undertaking a number of vacant property-specific activities:

- Creating a plan for vacant property revitalization
- Summer Internship through the Local Government Academy; tasks include:
  1. Compile data on the borough's abandoned structures, including "tax status, ownership, condition, code violations, and suspected/reported criminal activity.
  2. Identify all Borough-owned properties which are not utilized for municipal functions and develop a proposal for the mass appraisal of these properties.
  5. Develop criteria for the basis to determine whether a property is best suited for tax compromise, sheriff's sale, transfer to adjacent property owner in the case of disposition.
  6. Assess each property with existing data and recommend complete restoration, partial restoration, demolition, clearing for infill new construction or clearing for green space.
  7. Contact private property owners to determine their intentions regarding their use of the unoccupied properties.
- Working with Nine Mile Run to conduct a vacant properties pilot project in Wards I and III. The goal of this project is to raise adjacent property values by cleaning the lots, providing landscaping improvements, and constructing a fence. The properties will be periodically maintained, and the project will provide additional benefit the community by adding green space and therefore improving the watershed.





# Vacant to Vibrant (V2V) toolkit

## **A Toolkit to Combat Vacant Lots**

In the fall of 2006, a team of 11 graduate students at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College compiled Vacant to Vibrant (V2V), a guide for revitalizing vacant lots in the City of Pittsburgh (see Appendix 2) . The guide serves as a toolkit for vacant lots, showing assessment strategies, methods of navigating the various ways to go

about purchasing a lot, tactics to be used once the lot has been acquired, and listings of local resources that can provide assistance. While this guide primarily focuses on vacant lots that are devoid of structures, many of the principles within can be applied to abandoned properties as well.

### **Step 1: Finding out the Facts**

The first section of the V2V toolkit describes an easy-to-follow assessment process. It begins with steps to follow prior to setting foot on the lot, such as identifying the owner and history of the property, as well as any liens associated with it. V2V also provides guidelines for evaluating the lot.

### **Step2: Purchasing a Vacant Lot**

Next, V2V addresses the processes for purchasing a vacant lot for private individuals or groups. This section includes a flow chart displaying every step in the procurement process from start to finish.

### **Step 3: Green Strategies**

Finally, V2V provides an in-depth look at how to implement green strategies. The projects listed are divided into short and long-term initiatives. Short term initiatives refer to community gardens and public art, which serve as placeholders while the property remains vacant. Green enterprise projects, such as privately-operated gardens, and public works projects, such as the creation and maintenance of parks and other green spaces, can be more permanent structures in the community. V2V pays special attention to green enterprise; this toolkit would be an asset and should be distributed to any green entrepreneurs in Wilksburg.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

V2V is an excellent tool for lots devoid of any physical structures. Wilksburg, however, has many abandoned buildings in various states of disrepair. Some of the strategies discussed in V2V can still be applied to abandoned buildings, yet others cannot. When moving forward, this toolkit should be utilized whenever possible, but its limitations should be kept in mind.







# Making Wilkinsburg Strong

## What to do with buildings beyond repair?

Demolition gets a bad rap. Oftentimes people see it as a tool for displacement, or a misappropriation of funds. Many believe that money could be better spent on home repair and rehabilitation, giving people a place to live, rather than removing them. But what about buildings that are unsafe; that cannot be repaired? In regards to these buildings there are two options: ignore them, or tear them down.

Demolishing a house is relatively inexpensive, and if done correctly, can have a higher return on investments for neighboring homeowners than rehabilitation campaigns (Armstrong). The key is doing it correctly. This involves proper identification, prioritization, and maintenance once the job is complete.

### **Demolition Facts**

- Average drop in property value if near a vacant property, per 150 feet: \$7,627 (Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative)
- Average property value increase if near a demolished property, over time: 30% (Mallach)
- Average cost of demolishing a home (2007): \$18,000 (Weintraub)

## **Case Study: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

In 2001, newly elected Mayor of Philadelphia John Street faced a monumental problem: over 30,000 buildings in his city were abandoned, and a large portion of them were beyond repair. Street immediately announced a city-wide demolition campaign, targeting low-income neighborhoods adjacent to centers of economic growth. The city partnered with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, as well as other community organizations to maintain the resulting green spaces. The strategy proved successful, as a recent study by the University of Pennsylvania found that homes adjacent to well-maintained vacant lots saw an increase in property values of 30% over time.

PHS's Philadelphia Green program has compiled a **how-to manual** to help city agencies, community-based organizations and block groups reclaim vacant lots in the city. *Reclaiming Vacant Lots: A Philadelphia Green Guide* outlines a basic "clean & green" approach to managing vacant land, which involves clearing debris, planting grass and trees and installing fences.





## **Identification**

The Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative (MVOC) devised a rating system for identifying the condition of abandoned properties. The ratings range from “A” (no visible signs of deterioration, well maintained, new construction/renovation, historic detailing/unique), to “F” (house is an open shell, ransacked and full of trash, in danger of collapse, safety hazard to neighborhood).

Their survey should be used to identify the status of Wilkinsburg’s abandoned properties. Once identified, those properties that receive an “F” grade should be marked for demolition both physically (with paint or a flag) and electronically (using GIS and neighborhood database).

## **Prioritization**

Once the houses to be demolished have been identified, the next step is prioritization. The demolition of different houses in different neighborhoods will have different effects, and the key to prioritizing is working with one’s assets.

Think of East Liberty’s recent renaissance. Rather than focus time and money on rebuilding Penn Avenue, they instead built upon their strongest asset: their border with Shadyside.

Keep these in mind while prioritizing:

1. Is the property in or adjacent to a stable neighborhood (i.e. Regent Square, Black Ridge)?
2. Is the property on or near the commercial district?
3. Is the property near the gateways to Wilkinsburg?
4. Is the property near community assets (churches, schools, parks, etc.)?
5. Is the property near a redevelopment project?
6. Is the property part of a cluster of buildings designated for demolition (Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative)?



## **Potential Pitfalls**

Demolition is not without risks. For this strategy to be successfully implemented, it needs to be done strategically. If a building is demolished, and the resulting lot is not well maintained, then there will be no property value increase; it will be the same as if the decrepit building were still standing.

That is why it is so important to keep Wilkinsburg's assets in mind while properties are being assessed for demolition. A newly vacant lot adjacent to a church could serve as a summer meeting ground, which they would maintain and have a stake in. Conversely, a newly vacant lot in a more transient neighborhood would be less likely to receive community interest or support.

## **Salvage**

Salvaging, also known as deconstruction, refers to the reuse of building materials, fixtures, and appliances. Environmentally, salvaging is preferable because it reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills. Financially, salvaging is beneficial too: donated salvaged goods are tax deductible, and deconstruction can reduce the cost of demolition by nearly 50 percent! For more information on salvaging, or to find deconstruction contractors, contact Construction Junction.

| 9180 square feet, wood construction |                |           |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| Cost/ Premiums                      | Deconstruction | Demo Bid  |
| Labor                               | -\$33,000      | --        |
| Equipment and Disposal              | -\$ 12,000     | --        |
| Administration                      | -\$8,000       | --        |
| Total Expenses                      | -\$53,000      | -\$16,800 |
| Salvage Value Material              | +\$43,660      | --        |
| Net Cost                            | -\$9,340       |           |
| Savings with deconstruction         | \$7,460        |           |

Figure4: NAHB Research Center

## **Community resources**

Construction Junction  
[www.constructionjunction.org](http://www.constructionjunction.org)  
412.243.5025

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development  
[www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)  
412.644.5846

Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative  
[www.mvorganizing.org](http://www.mvorganizing.org)  
330.743.1196

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society -  
[www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/home/index.html](http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/home/index.html)  
215.988.8800

## **Financial resources**

Grants are available through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to fund demolition. Demolition grant programs include the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, Community Development Block Grants, and Entitlement Community Grants. Wilkinsburg should pursue all avenues to fund its demolition projects.



# Making Wilkinsburg Green

## Create Green Corridors

The Borough should consider the creation of **Green Corridors** of open space using vacant lot sites as a way to connect streets and neighborhoods instead of serving as boundaries. Increasing links and connectivity creates more intimate neighborhoods and encourages walking and outdoor activity. This is of particular importance in the areas of Wilkinsburg defined by long rectangular blocks.

## Encourage Community Expression

Transforming a vacant lot into a neighborhood creative space can have dramatic effects on a neighborhood. With minimal resources; sculptures, murals and performance spaces can showcase and explore citizen's creative talent while providing neighborhood gathering spots and beautification.

- In a study of public art in Buffalo, residential properties within 100 yards of community art installations or centers were shown to have on average 15% higher property values.

## Leverage Community Members

Encouraging and enabling community members to improve vacant lots independently is a quick and efficient way to transform neighborhoods at minimal cost to the Borough. **Side Lott Sales** are extremely low cost (or free) sales of vacant properties to adjacent neighbors who commit to maintaining and returning the lot to useful purposes. If regulations preclude outright property transfer, **Garden Waivers or Leases** can be issued, allowing neighbors to use borough property for gardens, green spaces or other private uses.



## Building on our momentum:

A lot of greening is already happening in Wilkinsburg.

Mindy Schwartz owns Garden Dreams a small urban farm in Wilkinsburg. The farm is built on two vacant lots that, prior to being reclaimed, consisted of derelict and abandoned houses. The farm is **Certified Naturally Grown** and also provides organic gardening products, consulting and raised bed design and installation.



The Borough should continue supporting and enabling groups that are contributing to Wilkinsburg's revitalization, while encouraging new and complimentary projects and activities.



## Use Vacant Lots as Educational Tools

Vacant lots have great potential as educational tools. **Integrating vacant lots into school curriculums** provides educators and students with any number of options for community development and educational enrichment.

Schools, Grades or Classrooms can **Adopt Vacant Lots** and integrate neighborhood revitalization into their educational goals. Projects can be molded to fit almost any area of the school curriculum:

- Agricultural or Horticultural gardens
- Urban Forestry
- Outdoor Arts Classrooms
- Technical Sciences
- Extracurricular Clubs
- Playground or Park Creation

**Youth organizations** from the community at large can also be harnessed to improve the community. Inviting religious, scouting, environmental, artistic and cultural youth organizations to propose new uses and improvements to vacant property encourages the community to begin rethinking ideas of responsibility and community involvement.

## Case Study: Student Conservation Association, Boston – Summer Youth Program

Students and staff from local schools, church groups and community centers spend the summer providing hands-on service doing meaningful work projects such as park building and restoration, revegetation projects, lot cleanup, construction and are engaged in weekly environmental education activities. Field trips complement this 6-week summer program. The program is designed to provide employment and education and to develop conservation and community leaders as well as improve the local community.

<http://www.thesca.org/category/specific-categories/Community-Programs>

## Community resources

Grow Pittsburgh  
[www.growpittsburgh.org](http://www.growpittsburgh.org)

Pittsburgh Green Jobs Corps  
[www.thesca.org/stories/pittsburgh-green-jobs-corps-gjc](http://www.thesca.org/stories/pittsburgh-green-jobs-corps-gjc)

Student Conservation Association  
[www.thesca.org](http://www.thesca.org)

## Financial resources

Blue Green Alliance  
[www.Bluegreenalliance.org](http://www.Bluegreenalliance.org)  
Student Conservation Association  
[www.thesca.org](http://www.thesca.org)  
International Youth Foundation  
[www.iyfnet.org](http://www.iyfnet.org)





# Making Wilkinsburg Home

A community of committed homeowners is the best solution to stabilize the community and eliminate the Vacant Lot issue.

## Cultivate/Grow Homeowners

The Borough should prioritize **Homeownership Education** programs for current residents. Giving renters the knowledge, tools and support to become homeowners is essential to stop the cycle of vacant lots. There is a wealth of organizations and agencies offering homeownership education courses that require relatively little borough support. According to the National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling and HUD:

- Individuals who graduate from homeownership education courses on average receive 1.2% lower interest mortgage rates than if they had no such education.
- Foreclosure rates are 20%-30% lower nationwide for individuals who have had some kind of homeownership education as opposed to comparable peers in their income group.

## Enable Homeownership

To encourage redevelopment the Borough should connect residents as well as those interested in moving to the community with financial incentives for renovating or purchasing homes and lots. Based on the assumption that a revitalized taxpaying property is better than a vacant one, the borough should consider selling certain borough owner properties in **\$1 Sales**. These sales allow properties to be renovated and returned to a productive role that otherwise would not be cost effective. They also make homeownership and improvement attainable to lower income residents.





The Borough has an image problem, many people don't think of Wilkesburg when considering places to call home. In order to attract new residents, families, artists and business owners the Borough needs to educate and inform the public about the benefits and opportunities that come with making Wilkesburg home.

#### Market Wilkesburg

The Borough should focus on promoting its strengths when it comes to attracting new community members, investment and business. Focusing on the historical, architecturally rich and affordable neighborhoods that make Wilkesburg unique should be prioritized. Supporting **Neighborhood Homeowner Clubs** allows residents of different incomes and backgrounds to share and coordinate skills and knowledge about renovation and home improvements. Fostering a **Wilkesburg House and Neighborhoods Tour** could bring in people from outside the borough and increase understanding of the unique opportunities in Wilkesburg. All the while challenging and changing outsiders' impressions of Wilkesburg.



#### "Re-Brand" Sheriff Sales

When properties have been identified as a good candidate for investment instead of hosting traditional borough or sheriff sales, the Borough should work with **established preservation, renovation and real estate clubs** and organizations to promote the sale with **property tours** and other promotional efforts. The real estate renovation and restoration community in Pittsburgh is highly organized and active but sadly, large historically valuable areas of Wilkesburg are completely off the communities' radar. Increased attention and awareness can only result in more and higher sales for the city.

### Case Study: Wilkesburg Housing Resource Center.

The **Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation** is targeting the Hamnet area of Wilkesburg for community revitalization. They are focusing on preserving a diverse, healthy and sustainable neighborhood through a multi-faceted plan that includes:

- A Community resource center that educates and assists homeowners while marketing the community.
- Providing quality low-income housing for current residents.
- Refurbished historical homes at market rate.
- "Shell homes" with all major refurbishing completed that allows private individuals to custom finish their home.
- Achieving a "critical mass" that will allow private investment to continue and spread to neighboring areas.



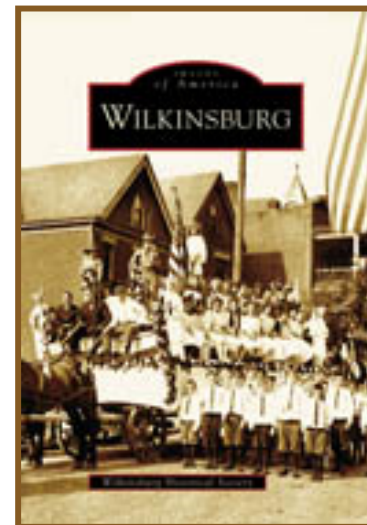
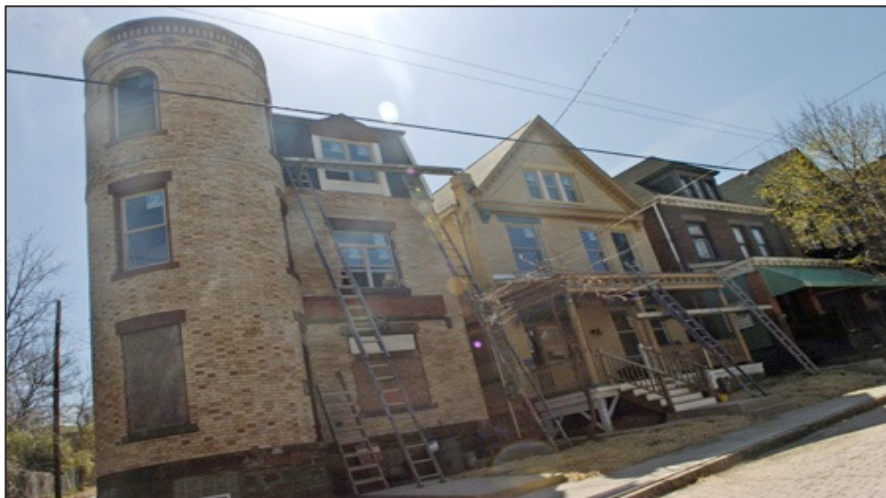
One method of housing development which promotes quality, affordable homeownership is the community land trust. While program structures greatly vary, the general model includes the following elements:

A nonprofit or community group holds the title for the land in a given development  
Homeowners are given the right to use the land for a given purpose (generally residential), often through 99-year leasehold interest. In many cases, this right is transferable to an heir which allows for wealth-building within a family.

The individual household has full ownership of the structure constructed on the land, with all the associated rights and responsibilities. The owners are often required to pay fees for common area maintenance and for use of the commonly-owned land.

Deed restrictions and covenants can be used to keep specified housing units affordable; property owners have the right to sell their home under the agreed-upon conditions. Often these arrangements are structured in such a way that allows the seller to earn equity from the sale. All restrictions and covenants are passed on to the purchaser.

For more information on the community land trust model, visit the Institute for Community Economics website at <http://www.iceclt.org/>.





## Case Study: Friendship Preservation Group. Friendship, Pittsburgh

The FPG is a **neighborhood membership organization** and advocacy group working on **zoning, beautification, housing stock revitalization, public safety, and youth, families and education**. Since its founding in 1989, The Friendship Preservation group has worked to affect positive change for all residents.

Whether advocating for zoning and code enforcement, removing litter from the streets, creating and maintaining a community park, planting flowers in the neighborhood, hosting neighborhood tours or working with the police to make the community safer, the group has helped make Friendship one of Pittsburgh's most livable neighborhoods. The transformation of the Neighborhood in 20 years has been dramatic and includes:

- A 500% increase in average home sales prices.
- A significant decline in crime and violence.
- Planting and stewardship of over 150 new street trees
- Landscaping and maintenance of Baum Grove, the community green space at 400 Roup Avenue
- Fundraising for and the building of Play Park at the local elementary.



## **Financial resources for Housing**

### **Vacant Property Reclamation Project**

Allegheny County Economic Development  
Dennis M. Davin, Director  
425 Sixth Avenue | Suite 800 | Pittsburgh, PA 15219 |  
412-350-1000

### **Neighborhood Partnership Program of Pennsylvania**

Southwest Regional Office  
1405 State Office Building  
300 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222 412-565-5002

### **US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)**

**HOME Investment Partnership Program (HOME)**: HOME program funds are distributed to municipalities via formula, much like the Community Development Block Grant program. Governments, nonprofits, and for-profit entities can access these funds to construct both rental housing and housing for homeownership, rehabilitate units for sale or rental, and to provide rehabilitation assistance for existing homeowners. The Borough of Wilkinsburg can apply for HOME funds through Allegheny County Economic Development (<http://economic.alleghenycounty.us/>). For detailed program-specific information, visit <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/affordablehousing/programs/home/>.

**Section 202**: HUD provides funding to nonprofit entities for the development of affordable supportive housing for the elderly through the Section 202 program. Funds can be accessed by responding to the annual Notice of Funding Availability in the Federal Register. For more information, visit: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/mfh/progdesc/eld202.cfm>.

**Section 811**: HUD provides funding to nonprofit entities for the development of affordable supportive housing for persons with disabilities through the Section 811 program. Funds can be accessed by responding to the annual Notice of Funding Availability in the Federal Register. For more information, visit: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/mfh/progdesc/disab811.cfm>.

**Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program (SHOP)**: This program provides for affordable homeownership through the mutual self-help method of housing development. In this model, recipient households contribute a considerable amount of sweat-equity to the project. Nonprofit housing organizations are eligible for this program. The management demands of this program are extensive, and the program is only open to experienced affordable housing developers. In the context of Wilkinsburg, this program could be helpful as part of a longer-term strategy. For more information, visit: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/mfh/progdesc/disab811.cfm>.

## **Other National Resources**

### **Enterprise Community Partners:**

<http://www.enterprisecommunity.org/>.

### **NeighborWorks America:**

<http://www.nw.org/network/home.asp>.

### **Low Income Housing Tax Credits:**

<http://www.huduser.org/datasets/lihtc.html>.





# Making Wilkinsburg Vibrant

Strengthening and drawing new businesses to Wilkinsburg is essential to the community's sustainability and livability. There should be a **Focus on revitalizing and re-branding the Penn Ave Corridor**. Thousands of cars travel Penn Ave every day, making it the epicenter of any attempt at re-branding Wilkinsburg as a sustainable and vibrant community. As the most visible and traveled street in Wilkinsburg, priority should be placed on transforming Penn Ave into a **Commercial and Cultural Corridor**.

## Provide Cultural and Community Space

Making city owned vacant properties along Penn Avenue available to Arts and Community organizations could improve quality of life and improve the community's sense of place while dramatically changing outsiders' impressions of the borough. **Low cost spaces for arts and artists** will give residents creative outlets, draw talent and bring visitors and small businesses into the commercial district. Storefronts filled with color, art and posters can serve to change the area even if the spaces are being used only a few hours a week.

## Support Small Business

We recommend encouraging the **establishment of a cohesive neighborhood business plan** aimed at giving Wilkinsburg a positive local "brand" that highlights Penn Avenue in Wilkinsburg as a unique destination, not merely a place to speed through. This plan could include **Small Business owner education, new business development incentives, common signage, and coordinated community marketing plans**.

- The US Small Business Administration has found the Small Retail Business Districts are making a comeback in America. 12% of Retail sales in 2007 came from these areas as opposed to 9% in 2000.



### Case Study: Lawrenceville and the 16:62 Design Zone

The 16:62 Design Zone initiative was launched in 2000 to promote the growth of craft, art and design related small businesses in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville and Strip District neighborhoods.

Taking advantage of high vacancies and low rents, community members and the Lawrenceville Corporation began aggressively encouraging the establishment, relocation and growth of small enterprises. By strategically focusing on the creation of an identifiable "brand" they situated Lawrenceville as a unique and thriving commercial destination.

According to the Lawrenceville Corporation, Since 1995 commercial receipts for the Lawrenceville area have increased over 250%



# Recommendations





# Making Wilkinsburg Sustainable



## KEYSTONE RECOMMENDATION

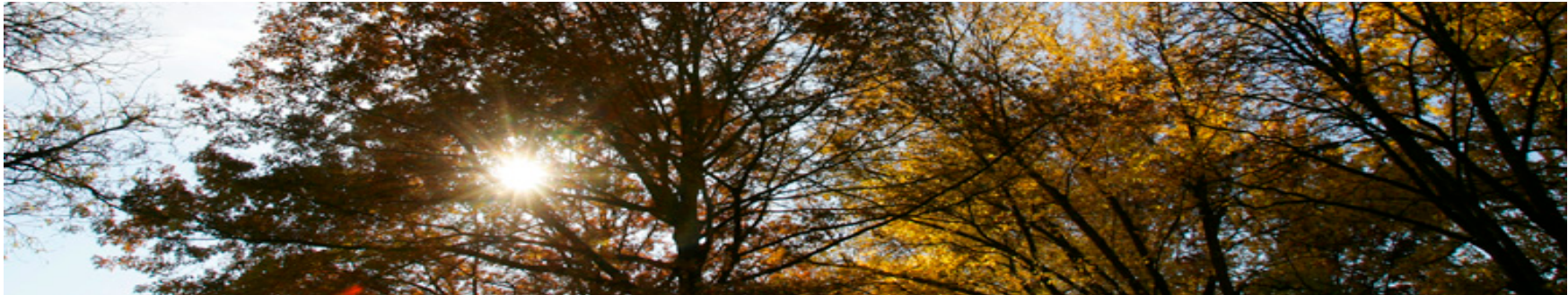
### 1. Create a framework for evaluation

Given the extreme level of population loss in Wilkinsburg and throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania, it is unrealistic to expect that population levels will someday return to peak levels. Therefore, it is imperative that Wilkinsburg incorporates “right-sizing” techniques in dealing with its vacant property problem. While certain portions of the housing stock must be revitalized, renovated, and/or reconstructed, it is important to note that many properties should not be used for housing. An important goal will be to identify the most appropriate use for each lot and to ensure that lots can be converted into assets for the community.

Wilkinsburg should develop a Borough-wide development plan, either as part of the municipality’s overall comprehensive plan or as a separate but supplemental undertaking. This plan should be participatory, and identify the future vision for each sector of Wilkinsburg. The East Liberty neighborhood in the City of Pittsburgh has utilized such a plan with positive results .

The Borough of Wilkinsburg will benefit from using a systematic process for evaluating all of their municipal owned lots. Over the summer we recommend that the Borough charge their two Local Government Association interns to develop site specific recommendations for each lot based on the toolkit outlined on page 19. Use of the toolkit will aid the interns in evaluating the characteristics of each lot and determine the best use of the space within the context of a community wide development strategy.

We recommend that the Municipality share their findings with community partners already developing vacant lots in the borough to ensure that overlapping agendas and conflicts are minimized. The municipal government does not have the capacity to develop every vacant lot in the borough and as such will need to work closely with its community contacts. Additionally, we recommend that the City Manager incorporate the findings from the summer intern project and the subsequent discussions with community leaders into the Comprehensive Plan. We recommend that these findings also underpin the Master Site Plan and are considered priorities in the Five Year Financial Management Study & Plan.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

### 2. Prioritize HUD funding for razing projects

We recommend that Wilkinsburg should prioritize HUD funding for razing buildings deemed unsafe according to the strategic vacant lot plan. The Department of Housing and Urban Development offers many funding opportunities for neighborhood development through its community development block grant program.

Recently Cleveland argued that those funds, in some circumstances, would be better used to raze unsafe buildings. They justified their position by claiming that HUD funding to raze unsafe structures would create a larger impact in increasing home prices than the same funding would put towards renovation and brick and mortar development

It is also significantly cheaper to demolish than to rebuild, meaning that a greater area of land can be affected for the same amount of resources. The cost can be reduced even further with an integrated approach to demolition, one that simultaneously incorporates salvaging and deconstruction techniques into the process. Reaching out to local resources such as Construction Junction may prove to be an excellent way to develop a partnership that focuses on reducing the cost of razing projects as well as maintaining environmental stewardship.

A 2004 study by the Wharton School offers a second reason why razing may be a good alternative. This report shows that Philadelphia homes that are adjacent to well-kept vacant lots have enjoyed a 30% property value increase over time. For a borough like Wilkinsburg that has experienced dramatic population loss it is likely that not all existing structures will find a productive use in the future. In these cases, well kept vacant lots are a greater asset to the community than abandoned and unsafe structures.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

### 3. Focus housing development in areas adjacent to Regent Square

From a level borough wide strategy perspective we recommend that housing development be concentrated in the Hamnet Place neighborhood adjacent to Regent Square for two reasons.

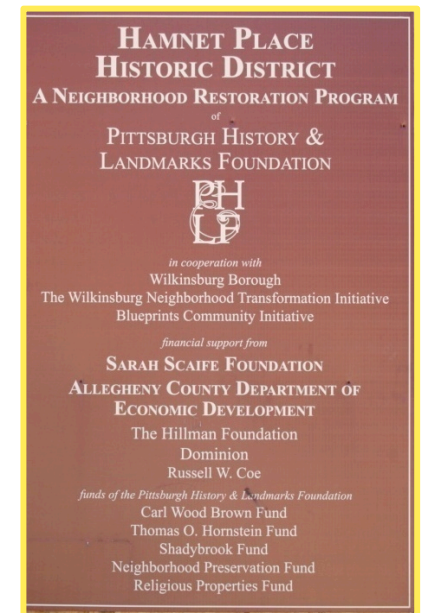
Firstly, there are simply not enough resources to rehabilitate all the abandoned housing structures in the borough. This situation thus requires a prioritization of projects. Due to the negative effects blighted properties have on surrounding property values there is little utility in investing in homes geographically scattered from one another. Individually they do very little to change the tide of disinvestments and the value of the investment is not leveraged.

To create synergy it is important to choose homes that have close proximity to one another, have high visibility and have the greatest potential to impact the perception of a neighborhood. The goal of housing redevelopment in Wilkinsburg should be to invest in high impact properties that encourage individual investment from homebuyers. The borough should aim to create a tipping point that will spread investment across Penn Ave and integrate with the Black ridge neighborhood.

To capture the maximum return on borough housing projects we recommend development adjacent to currently strong housing stock, which we have identified in the Hamnet Place neighborhood bordering Regent Square and Pittsburgh.

Secondly, there is a lot of activity around housing rehabilitation in this particular neighborhood. The Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation (PHLF) has received \$2 million to launch Phase II of its neighborhood restoration program. PHLF plans to rehabilitate 17 shell homes by stabilizing the floor, plumbing, roof and basic structure of abandoned homes with historical significance. They plan to sell these homes at market rate and provide resources through a Housing Resource Center to support individuals in completing the project.

PHLF has had success in Phase 1 of this project where they rehabilitated four homes. All of these properties sold and one of the owners has now purchased a side lot and created a ½ acre urban garden/farm next door.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4. Strengthen code enforcement

While focusing redevelopment efforts on Regent Square and beautification activities on heavily trafficked corridors is the best long-term strategy for community revitalization, it is imperative to stabilize the remaining areas. Ignoring these areas would be detrimental to the community from an equity perspective; this would create further income and resource stratification between the “haves” in areas such as Regent Square, and “have nots” in areas left behind.

A primary tool for stabilization is code enforcement. Properties should be monitored and violators must be cited and prosecuted. Doing so provides a framework for action against negligent owners and slumlords that have severely negative impacts on a community. That being said, wide-spread code inspections/enforcement can be a costly proposition for a municipality. One method of supplementing municipal efforts is to provide a framework through which concerned citizens can report potential violators and vacant properties. Washington, DC has implemented a similar program.

#### Case Study: Washington D.C.

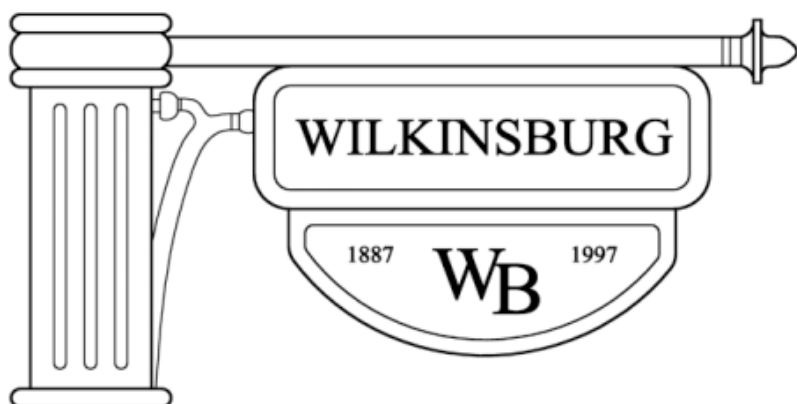
The District of Columbia provides a good example of a multi-faceted approach to both prevention and remediation of vacancy-related blight. Recently, the District passed the *Nuisance Properties Abatement Reform and Real Property Classification Amendment Act of 2008*. The Act creates the organizational capacity through which the DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) can monitor the city’s properties daily, as well as receive complaints and referrals for investigation.

As part of the program, DC property owners that vacate a home without intention of returning must register a property as vacant within 30 days. If an unregistered property is reported to the DCRA, a four-point inspection is scheduled that classifies the property based on appearance and condition:

- Does the property appear vacant?
- Does the property contain excess vegetation?
- Is the property covered with graffiti?
- Is the property open and accessible?

If a property is characterized as vacant, the owner on record is notified, who has 30 days to either provide evidence that the property is either occupied or exempt from a special vacant property tax rate of \$10 per \$100 of assessed value. No fines/penalties are assessed if there is a response by this point. Exemptions are limited and are designed to make sure property is returned to productive use.

If properly enforced, this Act will be an important tool in the District’s arsenal for ensuring that owners are responsible for their properties, and that vacant properties are sold to willing buyers. Obviously, resale of property, while a viable option in DC, may not be in cities and towns experiencing population decline in the urban core until larger issues (such as economic development, crime prevention, etc.) are addressed.



Not all owners of deteriorating properties are negligent. In many cases a property has a responsible homeowner who simply cannot afford to make necessary repairs. By providing financial or in-kind assistance (for example, through community service groups), property blight can be prevented before it becomes a problem. Funding sources do exist for this type of activity; one example is the HOME Investment Partnership program through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. This type of assistance will help guard the community against further decay and blight, and assist in sheltering low-income residents from predatory lending practices.

In our conversations with community leaders we found that a significant concern in the Borough was the need to ensure consistency in code enforcement. Wilkinsburg is likely to experience a boom in requests for development projects within the next few years and will benefit from stabilizing the Code Enforcement Department.

We recommend the municipality bolster the Code Enforcement Department in four ways: hire additional staff; increase the budget for enforcement; make capital investments in computer equipment and PDAs for every staff person in the field; conduct extensive training. The municipal government needs to change the culture surrounding citations from one that tries to work with land owners to one that holds land owners responsible. The focus of the department needs to be on increasing citations for broken windows, trash and tax evasion in particular. An increased presence in these key areas will reinforce the authority of the municipality and reassure new investors in the community. As such, we recommend that in addition to more resources the Code Enforcement Department be publically rewarded for their role in bettering the community and increasing municipal revenues.

The Mayor of Indianapolis also released a report outlining the legal and administrative framework currently in place to deal with the challenging and important problem of residential property abandonment in Indianapolis and Marion County. The report outlines a set of recommendations to improve this framework and the tools it provides the City, the courts, and the community to effectively address the abandonment of houses. We believe this resource will provide an excellent guide to the Borough of Wilkinsburg as it begins to directly address vacancy through code enforcement.

That report is available online at

<http://www.indy.gov/eGov/City/DMD/Planning/Docs/Housing/abandonedhousingreport0904.pdf>



## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

### 5. Streamline a permitting process for side lot sales, garden waivers and community spaces

In conversations with community members the issue of permitting surfaced as a road block to future development as well as a potential opportunity. Some community members reported inconsistent permit allocations to particular parties and not others, three year processing timeframes and unclear processes and chains of command. We also heard about Individuals inquiring directly to the borough building about a home that appears to be vacant where the individual had the intent to buy and there was no established process to communicate information about the property to interested parties. These are missed opportunities.

With increased development in Wilkesburg in the future it is imperative that the borough set clear, consistent but most importantly seamless processes for receiving permit and information requests, reviewing them and delivering a timely response. We recognize that the Pittsburgh region has a particularly high number of government bodies and municipalities leading to a rather bad reputation in regards to red tape and bureaucratic paperwork.

According to the Pittsburgh indicators Project, the Pittsburgh region (which includes Wilkesburg) has 37.5 local governments per 100,000 population compared with 18 for benchmarked cities. This is a significantly large number of permitting agents.



For developers and individuals interested in progressing some of the changes we want in Wilkesburg red tape is a major obstacle but also an opportunity. If Wilkesburg borough is able to make this process of permitting side lot sales, garden waivers and community spaces easy, intuitive and digital it will quickly attain a reputation for being easy to work with. This will in turn attract individuals and investors to the borough.

We also want to emphasize however, that an established permitting process does not mean that the borough distribute permits without discretion to anyone who inquires. We recommend that the borough maintain strong and consistent guidelines, but that they establish and cohesive framework for processing requests.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

### 6. Implement beautification projects at the entrances of Wilkinsburg to bookend the neighborhood

Of importance to the revitalization and sustainability of Wilkinsburg is the establishment of a local commercial and cultural corridor. As the primary through-way of Wilkinsburg and the way by which most outsiders experience and identify with the Borough, Penn Ave should be a center of focus for the community's efforts.

We recommend the establishment of “bookends” that take advantage of these travel patterns. The bridge over Penn Ave serves as the primary entrance to the neighborhood, and is in need of capital investment. The bridge appears in need of structural repair which perpetuates the perception of crime and poverty in Wilkinsburg. Replacing this crumbling bridge with an artistic gateway at the western entrance of the city would welcome guests to Wilkinsburg in a fun and exciting way, furthering the goal of revisioning the borough.

We also recommend the creation of an urban forest comprised of native trees near the 376 interchange. An urban forest would serve to re-create visual and emotional impressions of Wilkinsburg as a “green” or “sustainable” community as well as increasing the number of street trees in the borough. For more information about urban forest initiatives in the region visit Friends of the Pittsburgh Urban Forest at <http://www.pittsburghforest.org/Home> . After initial investments both projects would be low maintenance and provide a high visual impact on perception.

We also recommend encouraging a cohesive neighborhood business plan aimed at giving Wilkinsburg a positive local “brand” that highlights the Avenue in Wilkinsburg as a unique destination, not merely a place to speed through. This plan could include small business owner education, new business development common signage, and coordinated community marketing plans.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

### 7. Rebrand Wilkinsburg as desirable neighborhood through innovative programming and marketing

In order to stabilize the social community and the housing market and to draw new residents we recommend a concerted effort to rebrand Wilkinsburg as a Green, Sustainable and Artistic community through innovative programming.

We see current residents as the primary resource when combating neighborhood decay. Homeownership and education classes that give renters and homeowners the resources and knowledge to be the primary redevelopers of neighborhoods, need to be established.

To foster and encourage a community of citizens dedicated to the renewal and rebirth of Wilkinsburg's historic neighborhoods we recommend the establishment of neighborhood homeownership organizations and the re-marketing of sheriff property sales to begin changing the way outsiders see the Borough. As partners in this endeavor we suggest working with Pittsburgh's strong existing preservation, renovation and homeownership organizations.

Some strategies for achieving this goal are providing house tours and advertising for homes that come up for sale under sheriff sales processes. Currently it is very difficult for a member of the public who is interested in purchasing a home through this process to find listings let alone tour the property before the sale. We recommend that the Borough invest in creating a program that publicly advertises properties a few weeks in advance and provides access for interested parties to tour the property. This will not only increase the transparency of the process but will help to keep Wilkinsburg in the minds of interested homebuyers.

We also recommend working with existing homeownership clubs in Pittsburgh to establish a strong network of homebuyers in Wilkinsburg. This can help to ensure that newcomers to the neighborhood feel included and supported.









# Community Connections

## Demolition and Salvage

### **Construction Junction**

Contact: Mindy Schwartz  
214 N Lexington St  
Pittsburgh, PA 15208  
Phone: (412) 243-5025  
[www.constructionjunction.org](http://www.constructionjunction.org)

### **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development**

The Wanamaker Building  
100 Penn Square East  
Philadelphia, PA 19107-3380  
**Phone:** (215) 656-0500  
**Fax:** (215) 656-3445  
**TTY:** (215) 656-3452  
**Email:** [PA\\_Webmanager@hud.gov](mailto:PA_Webmanager@hud.gov)  
[www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)

### **Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative**

22 West Wood Street, 2nd Floor  
Youngstown, Ohio 44503  
Phone: (330) 743 1196  
Fax: (330) 743 1122  
[www.mvorganizing.org](http://www.mvorganizing.org)

## Environmental and Education

### **Pennsylvania Horticultural Society**

100 N. 20th Street - 5th Floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
Phone: (215) 988 8800  
Fax: (215) 988 8810  
[www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org](http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org)

### **Blue Green Alliance**

Pittsburgh Contact: Hillary Bright  
**Email:** [hbright@bluegreenalliance.org](mailto:hbright@bluegreenalliance.org)  
**National Headquarters**  
2929 University Ave. SE, Suite 208  
Minneapolis, MN 55414  
[www.Bluegreenalliance.org](http://www.Bluegreenalliance.org)

### **Student Conservation Association**

Contact: Walt Burlack  
Regional Director, Partnership Development  
239 4th Ave, Suite 2100  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
Phone: (412) 325 1851  
Fax: (412) 325 1856  
**Email:** [peppy@thesca.org](mailto:peppy@thesca.org)  
[www.thesca.org](http://www.thesca.org)

### **Garden Dreams Urban Farm & Nursery**

810 – 812 Holland Avenue  
Wilkinsburg, PA 15221  
Mailing address: 404 Center Street, Wilkinsburg, PA 15221  
Phone: (412) 638 3333  
[www.mygardendreams.com](http://www.mygardendreams.com)

### **Grow Pittsburgh**

5429 Penn Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
Phone: (412) 362 4769  
**Email:** [info@growpittsburgh.org](mailto:info@growpittsburgh.org)  
[www.growpittsburgh.org/growpittsburgh](http://www.growpittsburgh.org/growpittsburgh)

### **Growth Through Energy and Community Health (GTECH)**

Contact: Andrew Butcher  
214 N. Lexington Ave  
Pittsburgh, PA 15232  
Phone: (412) 241-1013  
**Email:** [a.butcher@gtechstrategies.org](mailto:a.butcher@gtechstrategies.org)

### [www.gtechstrategies.org](http://www.gtechstrategies.org)

### **Institute for Ecological Innovation**

404 Center St.  
Wilkinsburg, PA 15221  
**Email:** [greg@urbanhomesteaders.com](mailto:greg@urbanhomesteaders.com)

### **Nine Mile Run Watershed Association**

702 S. Trenton Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15221  
Phone: (412) 371 8779  
Fax: (412) 371 1157  
**Email:** [info@ninemilerun.org](mailto:info@ninemilerun.org)  
[www.ninemilerun.org](http://www.ninemilerun.org)

## Housing and Development

### **Action Housing**

425 Sixth Avenue, Suite 950  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
Phone: (412) 281 2102  
Fax: (412) 391 4512  
**Email:** [ah@actionhousing.org](mailto:ah@actionhousing.org)  
[www.actionhousing.org](http://www.actionhousing.org)

### **Hosanna House**

Contact: Leon E. Haynes  
807 Wallace Avenue  
Wilkinsburg, PA 15221  
Phone: (412) 243 7711  
Fax: (412) 243 7733  
**Email:** [lhi@hosannahouse.org](mailto:lhi@hosannahouse.org)  
[www.hosannahouse.org](http://www.hosannahouse.org)

### **Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania**

Contact: Ronell Guy  
710 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1000  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
Phone: (412) 281-1137  
**Email:** [ronell@housingalliancepa.org](mailto:ronell@housingalliancepa.org)  
[www.housingalliancepa.org](http://www.housingalliancepa.org)

### **Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation**

Contact: Michael Sriprasert  
100 West Station Square Drive, Suite 450  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15219  
Phone: (412) 471 5808  
**Email:** [michael@phlf.org](mailto:michael@phlf.org)  
[www.phlf.org](http://www.phlf.org)

### **Preservation Pittsburgh**

223 Fourth Avenue, Suite 800  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
**Phone:** (412) 583 2208  
[www.pittsburghheritage.com](http://www.pittsburghheritage.com)

### **Vacant Property Reclamation Project**

Allegheny County Economic Development  
Contact: Dennis M. Davin, Director  
425 Sixth Avenue, Suite 800  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
Phone: (412) 350 1000

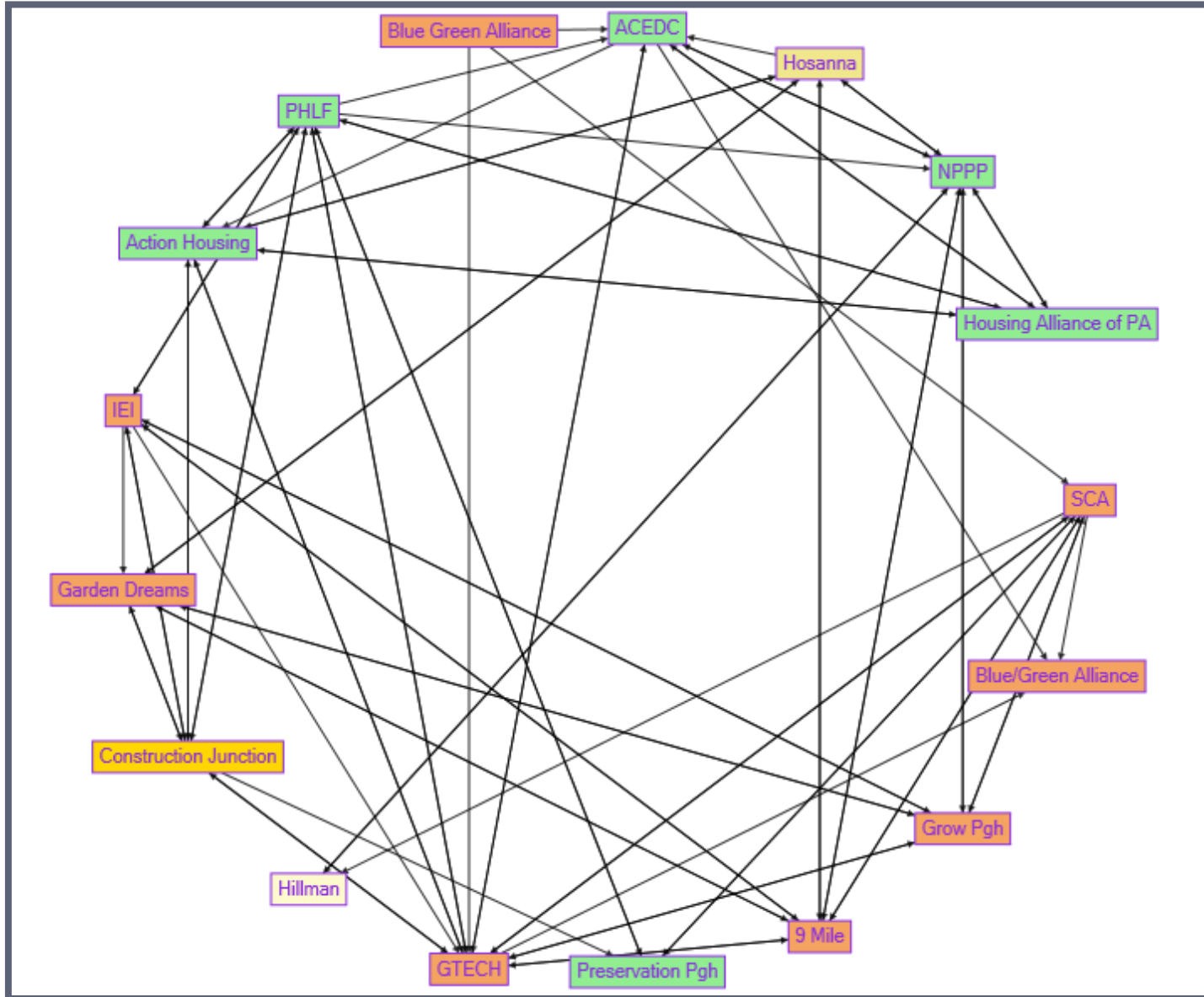
### **Hillman Foundation**

330 Grant Street, Suite 2000  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
Phone: (412) 338 3466  
Fax: (412) 338 3463  
**Email:** [foundation@hillmanfo.com](mailto:foundation@hillmanfo.com)  
[www.hillmanfdn.org](http://www.hillmanfdn.org)

### **Neighborhood Partnership Program of Pennsylvania**

Southwest Regional Office  
1405 State Office Building  
300 Liberty Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
Phone: (412) 565 5002

# Networking Map



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